

MATERIALISM IN TIMES OF COVID: AN OPPORTUNITY FOR A PARADIGM SHIFT

Professional declutterer **Arianna Steigman** brings her coaching skills to bear on people's relationship with 'stuff' and sustainability

During the Covid-19 pandemic, millions of us hunkered down in our homes in a bizarre form of house arrest. Whether we secretly relished the slowing down and seclusion or hated and stressed over it, lockdowns forced us to focus on our close environment and day-to-day habits. All of a sudden, those everyday actions most of us had been doing the same way for ages without a thought had to be planned, questioned and sometimes radically changed. Going to the shops for groceries became a military campaign of donning protective gear, hoping to score toilet paper and pasta; cooking became an endless cycle of feeding the whole family three times a day; catching up with family and friends became a technological operation involving Zoom calls and competing with schooling and work for Wi-Fi and devices. And there was no more travelling, and no more shopping for fun.

HELLO, I'M YOUR FRIENDLY NEIGHBOURHOOD DECLUTTERER

I am a professional declutterer, which involves being part super-organiser and part coach. I search for the 'why' in people's shopping or hoarding habits, in order to 'unknit' them and replace them with more constructive behaviours. I use techniques borrowed from the coaching world such as focusing on clear personal goals and finding well-tuned motivations, and combine them with simple practical advice like where to place one's laundry basket and how to recycle old charger cables; we talk about the rougher edges of life while pairing socks and sorting shampoos.

Doing so allows an instant and intimate view into people's lives. As one client put it: 'You knew about my favoured style of underwear and my childhood struggles with body image within five minutes of learning my last name!' These accumulated insights lead to a more general understanding of one's relationship with 'stuff'. It also allows me to offer my personal values of environmentalism and sustainability in a way that's relevant and helpful to people's day-to-day lives.

A CHANGE IN PERSPECTIVE

Most of us can identify with that happy feeling of buying new things – that 'high' of amassing paper bags laden with new clothes or gadgets on a shopping trip – even if deep down we might know that comfort-shopping doesn't make us happy in the long run. Once the newly acquired item settles into our established collection of belongings, it rarely keeps its shine and original appeal.

But as we were denied this momentary gratification through lockdown – whether due to the restrictions themselves or to the associated financial constraints – many people's relationship with 'stuff' shifted: with no new things coming in, and nowhere to go, many focused instead on what was already there.

Without the camouflage provided by the endless ticker-tape of daily duties and diversions, we started to notice things we had become desensitised to: the clutter hogging our space, time and energy, and the unceasing assault it mounts on our minds and senses. Judging

by the number of bags placed outside charity shops, and Facebook posts offering giveaways and pocket-money sells, many of us balked at this clutter and started shedding¹.

We began to edit and sift, room by room, in an effort to rid ourselves of this excess baggage and make our homes more spacious, serviceable and fresh. My sense was that, as individuals – even communities – perhaps we felt the burden of shouldering so much stuff and were 'shrugging off' the dead weight of unused, unloved or frankly unrecognised things. So out went clothes, knick-knacks, old toys and chipped crockery.

It gave some of us a sense of control – in a small way – in these strange and confusing times, and a sense of much-needed purpose to those of us left without a job.

AS WITHIN, SO WITHOUT

This slowdown had a noticeable effect on the space outside, too. As we stopped driving and flying everywhere, and the air had a chance to clear from the previously omnipresent smoke and fumes, and the level of noise and light receded, our cities turned quiet, sweet-smelling and clean. And as we retreated into our homes, leaving the great outdoors to other creatures, we saw animals take over the streets², come out of their hidey-holes in broad daylight and venture into the territories we had so long ago conquered.

Nature showed us that, if we just let it be, it can and will recover. We haven't ruined it beyond repair – yet. And thus our eyes and minds have been opened to the possibility – and with it, I believe, the duty – of sharing our planet in a more considerate manner with its other inhabitants, and of taking better care of it for our own and our descendants' sake.

This isn't an abstract, theoretical point. This involuntary retreat of humanity from nature has forced many of us to pause and consider our material influence on the world – and our collective responsibility for it. To put it simply, our voracious shopping and hoarding generates more waste than we can handle. Despite commendable efforts – by individuals, organisations and governments – to recycle our rubbish³, much of it accumulates in landfills or pollutes oceans⁴ and drinking water⁵, affecting our homes, our communities and our environment.

None of us can claim ignorance any longer. The information is out there. Our eyes have been opened to it. The question now is whether we harness this awakening to generate a positive change, or sigh in resignation and fall back to our familiar ways. I think that's where we – coaches, declutterers, anyone who claims to affect people's state of mind – come in.

SHIFTING PARADIGMS

We've lost so much to the Covid-19 pandemic – in productivity, income, socialising – that if, after this novel coronavirus is beaten, 'normal' life resumes and we simply go back to our old ways, we will have failed ourselves and our descendants. If we don't gain something from this, learn, let it change us and do things better from now on, it would be a tragedy of historic proportions.

Those of us who work with people can serve to distil and bottle these tentative realisations about our place in the world and how

we can better occupy it. As a professional declutterer, I help people reach this state of mind: to understand that stuff without purpose is pointless at best, and a burden at worst. We can free ourselves and our environment from this dead weight by saying 'no' to mindless purchases, by being thoughtful and mindful in our decisions regarding shopping and waste. Even a simple decision like wearing an item of clothing for a few months longer than we otherwise might would make a significant reduction in the amount of waste the textile industry creates.¹

This year is bringing this point home to many people, and we are in a unique position to ensure that this lesson learned at great cost isn't lost, but rather generates a real shift in our collective attitude toward ourselves, our homes and our environments. In giving ourselves permission and time to be introspective, in appreciating the comfort and beauty of useful items well-worn, and in manufacturing less and producing less waste, we are giving the planet a chance to recover.

We have an opportunity to be movers and shakers rather than just service providers. Let's make this critical moment in human history a paradigm shift, and not just a curious anecdote.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Arianna is the founder and owner of Reclaim your Space, a London-based decluttering and home-organising service dedicated to turning confused, stressful houses into beloved, functioning homes. Her aim is to teach people how to gain focus and calm through decluttering and tidying. She's active in promoting ecological and environmental awareness and behaviours within the decluttering industry as well as on her home turf. She's accredited by and an active member of APDO (the Association of Professional Declutterers & Organisers)

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1. For a means to do so, explore wrap.org.uk/content/clothing-waste-prevention

i. https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/jun/24/lockdown-wardrobe-clear-outs-threaten-to-flood-charity-shops?CMP=Share_AndroidApp_WhatsApp&fbclid=IwAR09jjULkVscr99bBx3XJZXNaug2h1f7BmlkMParDCsW39iPnocHOCqiwU

ii. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/newsround/51977924>; <https://www.theguardian.com/world/gallery/2020/apr/22/animals-roaming-streets-coronavirus-lockdown-photos>

iii. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-49827945>

iv. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marine_debris

v. <https://www.nrdc.org/stories/water-pollution-everything-you-need-know>